

Hero of compassion, in touch with the divine

Nga mihi atawhai – greetings to all in Mercy! It was a privilege last month to offer the mihi of welcome to US Sister of Mercy Marilyn Lacey, founder and director of Mercy Beyond Borders, visiting these shores for the first time to deliver the 2013 Catherine McAuley Lecture. Her travel plans had been upset by delays in San Francisco, following the crash of a Korean aircraft; in the event, scheduled visits to Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin were cancelled, and the lecture was delivered only in Auckland, though a Connect link-up meant that sisters in Samoa and some parts of New Zealand were able to follow her presentation live, and a link will allow others to share her insights at their leisure.

Few could fail to be impressed by the story of this slight, naturally shy sister, whose remarkable 30-year journey began in 1979 with a call for volunteers to help refugees. It's a journey that has taken her to South Sudan, where a quarter of the world's displaced people now live, and in more recent times to Haiti. She seems undaunted by the challenges she has faced – extremes of climate and terrain, risks of life-threatening disease, easy access to guns and liquor by men who hold women and girls as chattels. Her only insurmountable fear is an irrational response to spiders.

The bulk of Sr Marilyn's stories are about the women and girls whose lives she has helped to change. Women, some of them living with HIV or AIDS, helped to a measure of independence by her promotion of maternal health, or by the funding she provides for small entrepreneurial projects, such as selling charcoal or cooking meals for a roadside café. And girls, rescued by the chance of elementary schooling from being sold into early and inappropriate marriages by fathers, who judge their daughters' worth in terms of the number of cows a bride will win them. The opportunities offered by Mercy Beyond Borders are life-changing; 'we believe that where women learn, women matter,' is a rule of thumb.

But beneath the stories which Marilyn tells lies a spirituality which also deserves an airing. She retells gospel stories with the sharp ear of someone who hears the underlying truth that Jesus comes to reveal. 'Do you see this woman?' he asks the Pharisee who invites him to dinner. It's the woman of ill repute who has shown great love, because she has been forgiven so much and is accepted by Jesus uncon-

Imaging Mercy Today



MERCY BEYOND BORDERS: Sister Marilyn Lacey (centre) after presenting this year's Catherine McAuley Lecture, with Kath Deady, principal of Carmel College (left) and Gabrielle Huria who leads the mission services of Tiaki Manatu, Sisters of Mercy NZ Ministries Trust. Marilyn wears the lei presented earlier in the day by students of McAuley High School. (Photo: Patricia Rowe)

ditionally. It's the same sharp insight that enables Jesus to notice a poverty-stricken widow put her two small coins into the Temple treasury and, in doing so, contribute more than anyone else. The compassion of Jesus lets him observe what is happening in lives that others simply fail to see. That's why he is such a champion of the outsider.

Marilyn also unpacks for us the word used in the gospels to describe what happens when Jesus is 'moved with compassion'. It's *splagchnon* – the Greek word for bowels; it suggests that something happens within Jesus that is literally gut-wrenching. In short, there's a profound emotional reaction which is always geared to decisive action on Jesus' part. Whether it's indignation at the plight of lepers, deep sadness at the funeral procession of the widow's only son, or an overwhelming sorrow for the sick among the crowd, Jesus is prompted to heal and cure, to do whatever he can to ease the human tragedy that confronts him. When we are faced by the photo of yet another refugee or famine victim, how can we do anything less, asks Marilyn. No wonder the girls at McAuley High School, the Mercy-founded college in South Auckland, could count themselves abundantly blessed as they listened to her earlier in the day.

A few days later, I have the chance of helping Marilyn to catch her flight back to the US, and on to Chicago for another round of story-telling. Her visit has been short, but she has left a lasting challenge wherever she has been. She tells a story of being met by a Tibetan in the US the day after she was honoured by the Dalai Lama as 'An Unsung Hero of Compassion'. "He simply wanted to shake the hand of someone who had touched the embodiment of the divine. And in a way, we're all able to be that for one another, when compassion is the gift we receive and share." How's that for a summary of this year's Catherine McAuley Lecture? - Dennis Horton.

Touched by the divine

E te Atua Kaiwetewete:

God, you come to liberate and set free,
and no one is poor who is touched by your love.
Free us to share abundantly the riches you bestow.
May we never doubt our power
to make a difference to other lives
when mercy opens our hearts
and guides our path.
May others glimpse in us
a spark of the divine
which you place deep in each of us. Amen